

The Future of International Relations and Nuclear Weapons

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Shortly after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss argued that with the attack on the World Trade Center in New York “we were suddenly and rudely confronted with the fragility of human life. And we could not avert our eyes from the terrible sight”(2001). In truth we had been averting our eyes, but not from the horrific attack on New York, but instead we had been averting our eyes from the fragility of human life wrought by the attacks on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan 56 years before the attacks of 2001. It was with those attacks in Japan that death had moved into our hearts permanently.

There is no question in my mind that in these times it is not simply an issue of fearing for our lives, but also for our very humanity. Not only do we face the possibility of the most horrific deaths, but our efforts to survive our anxieties about such deaths, may lead us to live in ways that presage our descent toward a more bestial existence. As the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy has written, "From now on, it is not death we must fear, but living"(1998).

John Steinbeck (2007:9), writing about the age we have now realised, also understood how debilitating fear is to our humanity:

“For many years we have suckled on fear and fear alone, and there is no good product of fear. Its children are cruelty and deceit and suspicion germinating in our darkness. And just as surely as we are poisoning the air with our test bombs, so are we poisoned in our souls by fear, faceless, stupid sarcomic terror.”

The larger reason for the assault on our humanity is that the structure of war has changed profoundly in the past 100 years. War is no longer fought between armies where soldiers suffer the overwhelming number of casualties. Although civilians died in pre-20th century wars, soldiers made up 80 to 90% of the casualties. Now the ratio is reversed – the vast majority of the casualties are civilian. In the past we might rightly have thought of civilian deaths as an unfortunate side effect of military campaigns. That such deaths were, to use C. Wright Mills’ analysis (2000:8-9), the private trouble of someone who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Today the statistics show that the deaths of civilians in military conflicts are no longer private troubles. War and its weapons have created a structure of insecurity for a simple reason. Civilian deaths are no longer the by-product of war, **they are its aim**. We are all in the wrong place, at the wrong time. We are all targets.

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In order to understand how we might respond to these new conditions, I want to begin by considering the nature of contemporary warfare. In my lifetime we have witnessed a profound structural change in the character of war that has provided a concrete basis for our most profound fears.

The attack on the World Trade Center played out the logic that was inherent in the development of that bomb, and more broadly, war as it has evolved in the 20th century. Central to the evolution of war in the last century was that the distinction between soldiers and civilians had become blurred. Although this began to become apparent during the first World War, it was not fully acknowledged until the second when, with the advent of large scale aerial bombardment, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants essentially disappeared.

In 1921, the Italian theorist of air power, Giulio Douhet, published a work that is still to this day studied at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, and regretfully, by the associates of Osama bin Laden. In his book, *The Command of the Air*, Douhet argued that this new technology would transform the delimited concept of the battlefield and in the process make every man, woman, and child a potential combatant. Douhet wrote:

“By virtue of this new weapon, the repercussions of war are no longer limited by the farthest artillery range of surface guns, but can be directly felt for hundreds and hundreds of miles over all the lands and seas of nations at war. No longer can areas exist in which life can be lived in safety and tranquillity, nor can the battlefield any longer be limited to actual combatants.” And, “There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians”(Douhet,1942:9-10).

Now, although Douhet saw war as still taking place between nations and thought that national boundaries would limit war, he nonetheless understood that New York and its citizens, as well as other cities, would become the primary targets in the future. Although today's Pentagon likes to use the phrase “shock and awe,” 80 years ago US General Billy Mitchell was claiming something similar - that war's object was to “impress one's will upon the enemy.” This could be accomplished, he argued, through “seizing, controlling or paralysing his vital centers, that is, his great cities...” Before the advent of air power, the “vital centers,” the cities, could be protected by deploying an army around them which the opposing hostile army had to destroy in order to penetrate and take the city. The result of these antiquated tactics was, as in World War I, that the “attacker suffered even more greatly than the one attacked.” The way out of this impasse, Mitchell suggested, was by using airplanes carrying bombs which, “... can attack the vital centres of the opposing country directly, completely destroying and paralysing them.” (1960:3-4).

The military historian Walter Millis, writing in 1956, summed up what one of the predominant consequences of the inter-war shift to “command of the air” was:

“ ‘Independent’ air power could operate only through the direct attack upon, slaughter and starvation of the civil population. The civil population and its means of subsistence were, in the final analysis, air power's only practicable targets...”(1956:252).

The theory of air power was of course married to the use of nuclear weapons at the close of World War II, with Hiroshima and Nagasaki the ultimate symbol of this horrendous transformation in the nature of war - “More bang for the buck,” as John Foster Dulles reputedly said – a strategic insight that also was

not lost on Osama bin Laden. As you may know, the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki “with their entire populations of children, elderly, and women,” became, as the historian John Dower has indicated, “a staple in bin Laden’s public recitations of U.S. crimes against humanity...”(2010:152).

By being the targets of war today, and fearfully accepting the structure of insecurity that war and its weapons have wrought, humans are increasingly developing the mentality of the bunker. We thus risk not only our lives, but what it means to be human, as well. Sealed in the rooms we’ve designated for our survival in case of attack, we might waste away the time that we’re entombed by reading Shakespeare, though Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1989), or Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), might be more appropriate, given the landscapes we are likely to encounter when, and if, we emerge from our hovels.



The submarine in the photo is the USS Kentucky – 7 to 10 of these submarines are on the high seas at any time ready to launch their missiles upon a message from the President of the United States. The missiles can deliver 200 nuclear weapons each with a destructive power 30 times more powerful than the single bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.

That we are all targets today therefore does not only mean that we are the physical targets of the weapons our contemporaries in government positions have been designing for us over the past 100 years. We are also the political and psychological targets of these weapons irregardless of whether particular weapons are pointed in our direction or not. For, in their functional collusion, in their insistence on continuing to play out the logic of war, governments, the media, and other social institutions, insure that democratic politics is increasingly a charade and that we are deluded about its efficacy. War, and all the preparations done in the name of ‘security,’ trump democracy and create a world in which the future has been cancelled, as Bifo Berardi (2011) has argued. Elemér Hankiss made the consequences clear in his book *Fears and Symbols* (2001:65) in which he cites the characters Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, as “they have lost their human identity and dignity” as well as “their history and their memories.” Consequently, Beckett implied, “they have no past and no future, only a precarious and empty present; they live after the end of human history.”

As George Orwell also argued, war is directed against one’s own citizens, by becoming permanent, since “war keeps in place the particular mental characteristics necessary to maintain hierarchical political

arrangements.” The particular mental characteristics necessary to maintain such political arrangements were captured for me in an interaction that occurred between a CNN television anchor person and a doctor in Kuwait during the Iraq War. The doctor was attending to the horrific injuries of 12-year old Ali Ismail Abbas after Ali suffered the consequences of the American missile attack which killed 15 of his relatives on 30 March 2003 during the early days of the war. John Lee Andersen writing in *The New Yorker* described the physical condition of Ali:

“The child’s legs were smooth, but his entire torso was black, and his arms were horribly burnt. At about the biceps, the flesh of both arms became charred, black grotesqueries. One of his hands was a twisted, melted claw. His other arm had apparently been burned off at the elbow, and two long bones were sticking out of it. It looked like something that might be found in a barbecue pit.” (quoted in Jones, 2003).

More and more people have become numbed to the true character of contemporary war, and to consequently act like the CNN anchor Kyra Phillips who was the person who interviewed Ali’s doctor in Kuwait (Ibid.). When the doctor said that Ali had expressed the hope that no other children will suffer what he suffered, Phillips expressed some consternation. She asked, “Doctor, does he understand why this war took place? Has he talked about Operation Iraqi Freedom and the meaning? Does he understand it?”

Unlike Kyra Phillips, most Europeans know that the occupation of much of Europe during the Cold War by US military forces and their nuclear weapons did not protect them, but instead threatened them - the Cold War was the “peace of cemeteries,” as Jacques Delors suggested. The truth of war and military strength can more readily be found in W. G. Sebald’s “On The Natural History of Destruction,” and Günter Grass’s novel, “Crabwalk.” “Europe,” according to Delors, “was built to say no to conflict, no to the wars that repeatedly tore the continent apart.” What should animate us today is that Hiroshima is the ultimate symbol of this new understanding.

In his book, “The Fate of the Earth,” Jonathan Schell (2000:46-47) gave us a powerful sense of the reality underlying the symbolic power of the devastation of Hiroshima:

“The Hiroshima people’s experience...is a picture of what our whole world is always poised to become – a backdrop of scarcely imaginable horror lying just behind the surface of our normal life, and capable of breaking through into that normal life at any second. Whether we choose to think about it or not, it is an omnipresent, inescapable truth about our lives today that at every single moment each one of us may suddenly become the deranged mother looking for her burned child; the professor with the ball of rice in his hand whose wife has just died in the fires; Mr Fukai running back into the firestorm; the naked man standing on the blasted plain that was his city, holding his eyeball in his hand; or, more likely, one of millions of corpses. For whatever our ‘modest hopes’ as human beings may be, every one of them can be nullified by a nuclear holocaust.”

We must therefore return to politics, and not of the kind practised in Washington and other capitols. We cannot address our fears unless we address the causes of the violence that the world suffers in the form of wars and terrorism. Vaclav Havel, wrote in a 1984 essay on politics and conscience that, “No evil has ever been eliminated by suppressing its symptoms. We need to address the cause itself.” The

imagination necessary to envision the horrors wrought in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and lower Manhattan have been with us for nearly a century, and it is time that we rid humanity of this ever more powerful scourge. This will not be accomplished however through the bombing of other peoples - this is only further evidence of what the South African writer Nadine Gordimer calls, "Fear eats the soul" (2010:633).

Instead of fearing for our lives, we should be fundamentally concerned for our humanity, and reassert it. Vaclav Havel (1990:157) captured what I think our response should be. Quoting Jan Patočka, the author of Charter 77, Havel said that we need a "solidarity of the shaken." He asked:

"Does not the perspective of a better future depend on something like an international community of the shaken which, ignoring state boundaries, political systems, and power blocs, standing outside the high game of traditional politics, aspiring to no titles or appointments, will seek to make a real political force out of a phenomenon so ridiculed by the technicians of power – the phenomenon of human conscience?"

I want to conclude by briefly discussing Daniel Ellsberg's new book, titled *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, which will be published in a few weeks. As most of you undoubtedly know, Ellsberg copied the 7,000 pages of the secret history of the United States war in Vietnam, known as the Pentagon Papers. I've known Dan for several decades, and a few years ago he told me and others that he was glad that the U.S. government did not ask him during the legal proceedings following his release of the Pentagon Papers, if he had copied anything else – because in fact he had! He copied many more thousands of pages which comprised the United States' nuclear war plans.

One of the things he told me about the plans, and I think I have the estimate correct, is that 50 million Europeans would be killed if the US executed its plans. As he also points out, "[N]o matter the president, from Truman and Eisenhower to Obama and Trump, it has been American policy to launch a nuclear first-strike even if we have not yet been attacked. He also notes that "a close study of US "first-use" policy. Yes, no matter the president, from Truman and Ike to Obama and Trump, it has been American policy to launch a nuclear first-strike even if the United States has not yet been attacked."

It is also Ellsberg's belief "that multiple presidents have used nuclear weapons in threatening other nations since Nagasaki. He presents a long list of such moments, and along with many, he is particularly worried about Trump's recklessness toward North Korea. He recalls Trump asking an adviser about nuclear weapons, "If we have them, why can't we use them?" Trump also wondered if our allies, Japan and South Korea, should consider designing their own nukes." (Mitchell:2017).

Daniel Ellsberg should be invited to address the entire European Parliament – I hope you can make that happen!

Thanks very much!

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